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THE MARINE MASK OF WAR

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In an era in which our national security establishment is being asked to consider draconian cuts as part of the Nation's reaction to its strained fiscal health, it behooves us to truly understand the unique character of the institutions that make up our armed services. More specifically, on this date, celebrated around the world as the 236th birthday of the U.S. Marine Corps, we should pause and appreciate the particular contributions that our Corps of Marines provides for us and the great value the Nation garners from its investment in its Force-in-Readiness.

Over two decades ago, the late Carl Builder, an acclaimed defense intellectual who worked for the RAND Corporation, a Pentagon-funded think tank, penned a provocative book. This book, titled *The Masks of War: American Military Styles in Strategy and Analysis*, has been a well-regarded classic in the library of many defense and security professionals. In *The Masks of War*, Builder sought to understand why our Services act the way they do, why they prize certain values and particular platforms, and how they relate to the nation's defense needs. Builder created a useful framework for this study of organizational culture, one that allowed him to explore what he found to be the sometimes puzzling, frequently paradoxical, and unusually distinctive "personality" or institutional DNA of each of America's armed services.

The principal flaw in this book is that it overlooked the Marines. Builder, reflecting his bias as a strategic thinker devoted to defense-wide and nuclear matters, did not think the Marines mattered all that much. He admitted that despite a distinctive, even colorful, institutional personality, they were not an independent actor with a significant voice in strategy or force planning. This will come as a surprise to anyone who has tried to wrestle with the Marines in the Pentagon or on the Hill when it comes to budget matters impacting the Corps.

Writing as he did in the late 1980s, before the end of the Cold War, Builder might be forgiven. In his day, only one Marine General had ever served in a senior position in the Joint Warfighting community.¹ Now looking back over the past 20 years, Marines have served as the Chairman and Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and seven Marine Generals have served as the Commander of five different Joint combatant commands.² Today, General James N. Mattis leads the U.S. Central Command, with oversight of two ongoing conflicts and numerous flashpoints. A Marine General, John Allen, commands the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan at present. Moreover, the Marines were the enabling anvil to General Normal Schwarzkopf's famous "left hook" in Kuwait during Operation *Desert Storm* in 1991, and General Mattis' 1st Marine Division swept aside several Iraqi divisions as it raced to Bagdad in 2003 on the right flank of the U.S. Army during Operation *Iraqi Freedom*. Clearly the Corps does not lack for leadership or a strong voice in national security affairs or an active role in Joint operations. While the Marines may be allocated only 7 percent of the Defense Department's budget, they bat well above their weight in the Pentagon and they deliver combat capability well out of proportion to their cost.

The purpose of this brief note is to fill in the vacuum that the late Mr. Builder left and tie the Corps' position as the world's

¹ General George Crist, USMC was Commander, USCENTCOM during the late 1980s, during U.S. naval operations against Iran.

² Including US Strategic Command (General J. Cartwright), US Atlantic Command (General Jack Sheehan), Joint Forces Command (Gen. J. Mattis), Southern Command (General P. Pace) and CENTCOM (Gen. Joe Hoar, Gen. G. Crist, Gen. Tony Zinni, and Gen. Mattis)

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premier crisis response force to today's principal security challenges. Builder's framework contrasted the Services' identities on five elements or what he called "faces." These were explicitly chosen to draw out the differences between the Services. It is these five faces that constitute each Service's Mask of War:

1. What characteristics and icons they valued, their "altars for worship"
2. Their concerns with self-measurement
3. The preoccupation they have with hardware and technology, or "toys versus the arts" of war
4. The degree and extent of intraservice or branch distinction, and finally
5. The degree of insecurity about Service legitimacy and relevancy.

THE FIVE FACES

Altars for Worship. Builder defined these as the guiding principles of each Service. A devotion to tradition and independence were the two "altars" he found relevant to the U.S. Navy. Command at sea was the "holy grail." The Air Force he said worshipped at the altar of technology. For the Army it is a connection to the Nation and its citizenry; the Army sees itself as loyal servant of the people, America's Army. To the Marines, it is teamwork and the subordination of the individual to the common good of the unit. First person pronouns are shunned. The Marines worship at the altar of combat readiness—physically, mentally and morally. Marines remain identified as Marines for life: "once a Marine, always a Marine" is more than an expression of respect, it's a form of worship of service and a genuine recognition of the arduous process of becoming a Marine. Another altar is an expeditionary ethos, one that prepares units and individuals for rapid deployment and immediate employment in every "clime and place."

Self-Measurement. Builder believed that each of the Services was preoccupied with measuring themselves and their institutional health by some number. To the Army, it's their overall end strength, for the Navy it's all about the number of ships (600-ship Navy in the 1980s, 313-ship goal today). For the Air Force, it's the aerodynamic and technological quality of their airframes which is a priority. The quality of the Fifth Generation F-22 is what the Air Force touts, and the relative age of their aircraft. The Marines are quantitative as well. They lobbied Congress in the 1950s to have their force structure of 3 Marine Divisions and 3 Marine Aircraft Wings enshrined in public law to preclude their rivals in the Pentagon or OMB cost analysts from whittling them down to insignificance. Over the last few decades, the Marines have been very conscious of their end strength like the U.S. Army. However, they ultimately measure themselves by results in the field, not inputs like funding levels or force size.

Toys versus the Human Dimension. Of all the Services, the Marines emphasize the human dimension and art of war over science. The other Services, Builder noted, were increasingly devoted to their "toys," with the Air Force the most technologically oriented. Builder would undoubtedly find the Marines different. Their understanding of war stresses the fog, friction and uncertainty inherent in human conflict. Their warfighting philosophy of Maneuver Warfare stresses this human dimension in peace and war. This is why the Marines were so resistant to the Revolution in Military Affairs and the Rumsfeld Transformation agenda, which they found to be tied to transient advantages in technology. The Marines will occasionally invest in breakthrough technologies, like their prized tilt-rotor V-22 *Osprey*. As Clayton Christiansen showed in his best-selling *The Innovator's Dilemma*, successful transformations are rarely the result of technology, but that to remain successful, businesses do need to be prepared to recognize and seize advantage of disruptive innovations. Clearly, despite its higher cost, the Marines believe that the V-22 affords them new advantages in terms of the *Osprey's* range and speed that will prove disruptive to future foes. Overall, however, the Corps invests a larger portion of its budget in personnel than any of the Services, and invests more on a per capita basis on selection, initial training, and development.

Intraservice Distinctions. The Corps makes far less distinction between its various branches. Like the Army, the Marines have infantry, artillery, tank and engineering units and specialties. Like the Air Force and Navy, the Marine aviation component can be sub-divided by fixed-wing jet jocks, or helicopter pilots or support personnel. The Marines are individually proud of their particular specialty and like to compete with the other Services in their skills but rarely attempt to distinguish themselves with insignia, unique apparel, or devices that the other Services value. Inside the Marine Corps, it is enough to have graduated Boot Camp or Officer Candidate School and be christened simply "a Marine." To that "face" one can also add the mantra that "every Marine is a rifleman" first and then his sub-specialty. Each Marine is trained as a basic infantryman, and then goes to additional training. The only device or insignia that is treasured is the Eagle, Globe and Anchor that all Marines, regardless of rank or position, wear proudly. Elite units, even Marine Reconnaissance units, are usually played down. If you're a Marine, you are part of the team.

Service Paranoia. Because the Marines do not "own" or dominate a distinctive domain of the operating battlespace in the way

the Navy does with the oceans or the Air Force over the aerospace domain, they are the most concerned with their legitimacy. Every nation needs a navy and an army. But a Marine Corps is a luxury for most countries, although the need to project power far from our shores is considered a prerequisite for a global superpower. The Marines are conscious of the fact that the U.S. Army ultimately proved themselves in amphibious operations in World War II in landings in North Africa, Italy, Europe and throughout the Pacific. The Marines openly acknowledge that the Nation doesn't absolutely need a stand-alone Service to conduct amphibious operations, but that the Nation wants the Marine Corps that it does have. This sense of insecurity stokes the Corps' institutional paranoia and makes it less complacent about its place in the national security architecture than the other Services. Former SecDef Robert Gates challenged the Marines in a major speech in San Francisco last year, and the Corps was not happy about being considered complacent about the future.³ That speech fueled the Corps' natural paranoia about its position in a post-Afghanistan world.

They need not worry. The Corps' expeditionary ethos and its devotion to readiness are highly relevant for today's uncertain age and resource-constrained situation. A balanced force, poised to respond to simple emergencies at one end of the conflict spectrum and ready to leap immediately to complex contingencies at the other end fits America's needs now and in the foreseeable future. Single purpose or niche capabilities may be needed in specific scenarios, but forces that can cover down on a range of possible crises and adequately perform across a wide range of missions should be valued when the budget gets tight. The Corps' Mask certainly framed it into a valuable and enormously flexible instrument of U.S. foreign policy. Over two centuries of service, calls to "Send in the Marines" have become synonymous with readiness, discipline, and success.

Builder found that the other Service masks were fixed and resistant to external direction by our national security leaders. To him the faces of our armed forces were entrenched as "engines of glacial stability," impervious to outside change. The Marines are different, as their Mask of War (and paranoia) promotes change. It promoted adaptation in the development of new tactics and revolutionary technologies when needed. It also promoted improvisation in the face of cunning and cruel opponents in Korea, Vietnam, Al Anbar and Helmand Province. It has framed today's Marine Corps into a potent middle-weight fighting force prepared to respond promptly to foreign aggression, emerging crises, or humanitarian disasters around the globe. As demonstrated over the last decade, this versatility and cost effectiveness is a good deal for the American taxpayer.

Having examined the Mask of our Marines, we have great reason to celebrate with them today as they pause to reflect on their glorious legacy in peacetime and in war. *Semper Fidelis*, the Corps' motto, means "Always Faithful." They have been consistently faithful to their values, to themselves, and to their critical mission. So, give thanks if you know any Marines and Happy Birthday to our Corps!

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³See the transcript of Robert Gates, Marine Memorial Association Speech at <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4672>